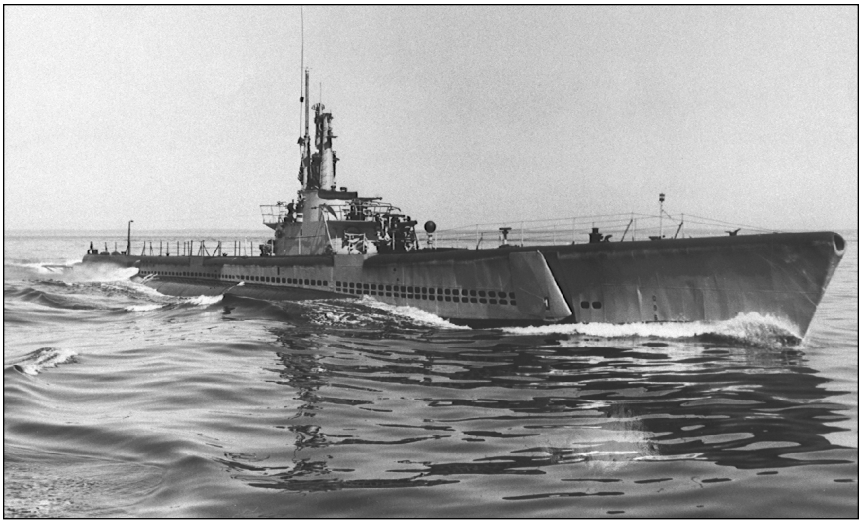
CHAPTER 1

Special Mission

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER FRANK WALKER was not averse to hollering orders through the open hatch. "Mr. Mazzone, bring us to periscope depth!" The Navy Department would surely disapprove of his method, but in the cramped confines of a submarine it was a method that worked quite well. "Sixty-four feet, Captain," came the response from below. Walker turned to his executive officer, Lieutenant William J. Ruhe. When Walker gave a slight nod, Ruhe gave a firm tug on the control handle. The shiny periscope slid silently, smoothly upward. Crouching on the conning tower deck, Walker caught the scope's levers as it rose. "Hold it there." Ruhe shifted the lever. With his right eye glued to the optics, Walker quickly crabbed in a full circle. He first checked the horizon, then the sky. "All clear. Take it up." The tube rose again, and with it the captain, his back slightly hunched as he squinted at the world above him. Clicking in the six-times magnifier for a telescopic view, he carefully, slowly panned left, then right, then left again. "I see the beach, but no signals. Range. Mark." "Three thousand double-oh," came the response. "Down scope."[1] Ruhe tugged the pickle-shaped handle again. The scope dropped quickly, leaving the bare metal tube glistening in the dimness of the conning tower.

Walker turned to his yeoman, Al Dempster. "Yeo, what's that security signal again?" Dempster pulled the flimsy from his clipboard and reread the radio message: "Two white panels fifty yards apart, Skipper." [2]

The captain took a few minutes to sip a cup of coffee, brought hot and fresh from the officers' pantry by his chief steward. He called again for the scope. As he swept the horizon he spotted a white speck to the north. In high magnification he could make out a sailboat headed along the coast. He watched it carefully, for Frank Walker had developed an aversion to small boats. Just two nights before, while transiting Balabac Strait—a heavily patrolled passage between northern Borneo and the west-southwestern tip of the Philippines—



USS *Crevalle* (SS291), a Balao-class fleet submarine, taken after the war.
(U.S. Navy Photo from the National Archives)

the crew of the most innocent of outriggers shot flares into the sky as the submarine passed, attempting to alert the Japanese to his presence. He had vowed that night to blast out of the water any boats that got in his way.[3]

Walker turned his attention to the beach. He scanned the shore from north to south and back again. As the periscope plunged into its well, he told his crew there was nothing yet to see. No people. No flags. Nothing. "Mr. Ruhe, post a watch on both scopes and maintain course zero-five-zero." The captain disappeared down the control room hatch. It was nearing eight-thirty on Thursday morning, 11 May 1944, as the USS *Crevalle* crept silently beneath the dark waters of the Sulu Sea, two miles off the coast of Negros.[4]

When the call for volunteers to man the periscopes squawked over the intercom, Motor Machinist's Mate John Maille jumped at the chance to get away from the tedium of tending the engines and motors. After he climbed up into the cylindrical steel capsule that was the conning tower, he asked Bill Ruhe what they were looking for. Ruhe described the security signal. Maille leaned into the eyepiece of the scope to begin his watch.

Below in his tiny cabin, Francis David Walker Jr. reviewed the orders that three days before had terminated his war patrol, sending him a thousand miles to the north, into the middle of the Visayas. A frown creased his pudgy face as he read:

TOP SECRET. PROCEED TO BALATONG POINT, POSITION NORTH OF BASAY, NEGROS ISLAND (LAT. 9-24 N. LONG. 122-36-36 E.). AT SUNSET 11 MAY OBSERVE SECURITY SIGNAL, SURFACE, AND RECEIVE FROM BOAT FLYING U.S. COLORS TWENTY-FIVE PASSENGERS AND IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS.[5]

"Rescue mission," he muttered to himself. Frank Walker would have preferred to shoot his remaining torpedoes at some meaty target, return to Australia for more, and get on with the job of waging unrestricted war against the enemy.

The thirty-one-year-old Annapolis graduate was a vastly experienced submariner. His war had begun in these very waters, as executive officer on the Manila-based *Searaven*. With her he had made six desultory war patrols, including his first special mission, delivering fifteen hundred rounds of three-inch antiaircraft shells through the Japanese blockade to the beleaguered garrison at Bataan. But when Bataan fell on 9 April 1942, *Searaven* was told to dump the ammunition and forget the Philippines. Her crew must have been heartbroken at the lost opportunity to aid American forces. Two days later *Searaven*'s patrol was again terminated when orders came through for a second special mission: rescue thirty-three Australian aviators from West Timor.

Crevalle's officers for her third war patrol (left to right, back row: Dick Bowe, Howard Geer, Jim Blind, Executive Officer Bill Ruhe, Captain Frank Walker; front row: George Morin, Walt Mazzone, Luke Bowdler). (U.S. Navy Photo via Al Dempster)

Though successful, the pickup took five difficult, dangerous days, and on the way down to Fremantle a fire in one of the engineering compartments disabled the submarine. For more than twelve hours *Searaven* drifted helplessly in the Timor Sea. Another submarine came to her rescue and towed the wounded sub into port.[6] For Frank Walker that patrol was not an auspicious introduction to special missions.

After leaving *Searaven,* Walker was rotated back to the States to help put *Crevalle* into commission in June 1943. He made two very successful runs as her exec under the daring Lieutenant Commander Henry Glass Munson. Now the boat was Walker's.

Walker had good reason to feel optimistic about *Crevalle*'s third run. The crew had responded well under his direction. His superiors in Australia would surely approve of his aggressive leadership. Hadn't he already fired eighteen of his twenty-four torpedoes, sinking or damaging three Japanese *marus,* merchantmen like that monstrous oil tanker? For that there might be a Navy Cross in the offing. But Walker would rather forget the shellacking his boat had taken after putting down the big maru, sixty-one bone-rattling depth charges in a sustained attack that nearly destroyed *Crevalle.* He must have shuddered when he thought how close to oblivion he had taken his first command. When the special orders ditted and dahed out of the ether, Walker had been preparing to turn his ship homeward, back toward Fremantle in Western Australia. Perhaps en route he would have found some unwary convoy to attack. Perhaps he would have been able to fire his remaining five torpedoes and chalk up another ship. *Crevalle* was a fighting machine, not a bus. But with receipt of these new orders Frank Walker had reluctantly resigned himself to play bus driver.

His bus was one of ten dozen Balao-class fleet submarines built for the navy during World War II.[7] Each a tad longer than a football field, the fifteen-hundred-ton ships were the successful culmination of forty years of American submarine design and experience. Named after a particularly fierce variety of saltwater jack, *Crevalle* was a product of the Portsmouth Navy Yard in New Hampshire.[8] Into her cramped interior spaces she packed a crew of eight officers and seventy-two enlisted men, most of them hardened veterans of undersea warfare, all of them volunteers. She carried six torpedoes in her forward tubes, four in her aft tubes, and fourteen reloads. She could dive well below four hundred feet, cruise more than eleven thousand miles without refueling. On the surface her diesel-electric drive could push twenty-one knots. Submerged, running off her batteries, she could sprint at nine knots for an hour, or

slug along at two knots for nearly two days.[9] Unlike the aging *Nautilus* and *Narwhal,* big cruiser subs now fully dedicated to Philippine cargo runs, *Crevalle* was a modern fleet submarine. She was not designed to carry passengers; her builders intended for her to sink ships. And *Crevalle* had already proved she was up to that task. After just three patrols she took credit for sending eight vessels to the bottom. A bus indeed.

Up in the conning tower, motormac John Maille continued his periscope sweeps, scanning the shore for white panels. The seaman had not been told that two dozen American refugees were to gather on the beach at sundown, hoping for deliverance. The captain would withhold that information from his crew at least until those signals appeared, and those people appeared, and a rescue seemed imminent. If no one showed up that evening, Walker was prepared to make another attempt the following night. Then he would leave the refugees to fend for themselves. After all, he thought, what could be so special about these people—and those papers?